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The Panegyric to the Hebrews: A Response to Amy Peeler

MATTHEW V. NOVENSON

There is a certain irony in the fact that Amy Peeler presents her paper "With Tears and Joy: The Emotions of Christ in Hebrews" in this venerable lecture hall under the watchful eye of Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, who in 1912, a stone's throw from where we sit today, wrote the classic little study, "On the Emotional Life of Our Lord."¹ Warfield's sources are the canonical Gospels, and he undertakes to investigate "the emotions ascribed to Jesus in the Evangelical narratives."² But near the end of that study, Warfield leaves behind the evangelical narratives and comments instead on the subject of my colleague's essay. While the Gospels do speak to the emotions of Jesus, Warfield opines, "The highest note is struck by the Epistle to the Hebrews.... [in which,] when we observe [Christ] exhibiting the movements of his human emotions, we are gazing on the very process of our salvation."³ That Warfield turns aside to Hebrews in order to make his point about the Gospels is, I take it, indirect evidence that Peeler is basically right. Hebrews is at pains, in a way that no other first-century Christian text is, to reflect upon the affective aspects of Jesus' experience, so that the theologians are warranted when they appeal to Hebrews in certain finer points of Christological discussion. As I see it, Peeler's excellent paper provides us with a plausible historical-critical (more specifically, rhetorical-critical) rationale for this legitimate theological use of our text. For my part, I come to Peeler's essay as a Paulinist, which for fifteen centuries would have made me a Hebrews scholar but does so no longer.

1 B. B. Warfield, "On the Emotional Life of Our Lord," in Princeton Theological Seminary, *Biblical and Theological Studies* (New York: Scribner's, 1912), 35-90.

2 Warfield, 38.

3 Warfield, 88-89.

Nevertheless, I think I can contribute to the discussion that she initiates by raising questions about several aspects of her argument, which I will do under three headings.

First of all, I would like to speak to Peeler's exegesis of the epistle, with which I have little disagreement. She makes a generally compelling case for her thesis, although some particular arguments are stronger than others. Peeler is surely right to make much of the word *πάθημα* and cognates, which are conspicuously present in Hebrews, but there are problems with her analysis of the word group. Peeler glosses *πάθημα* with "the emotional experience of suffering" (Peeler, 16). This is a fair account of the semantic range of the word, but it conflates at least two discrete definitions. *πάθημα* can mean either "suffering, thing suffered" or "passion, emotion"; but in any particular case, it is typically used to mean one or the other of these things, not both.⁴ In fact, both *πάθημα* and its cousin *πάθος* can carry either of these meanings, but in actual usage, the former more often means the former and the latter the latter. In this connection, it may be significant that our author never uses *πάθος*, only *πάθημα*.

Later in the same section, Peeler wants to suggest 12:2 ("Jesus, who for the joy laid before him endured the cross") as evidence for her suffering-as-emotion motif. "As the only mention of the cross in the entire work, this reference would have carried notions of suffering, both physical and emotional for the readers" (Peeler, 16). Here she reasons from the word *σταυρός* to "notions of suffering" to emotional notions in particular, but this is rather further than one would like to have to carry evidence. Granted, "suffering" signifies an aspect of lived experience, one part of which, for human beings at least, is emotion. But it is imprecise, even false, to suggest that this whole bundle of associated concepts is contained in the word "suffering." I do not think this objection strikes at the heart of Peeler's thesis, only that her semantic argument in section one should run differently than it in fact does.

4 See LSJ, s.v. *πάθημα*. In 2:9, one is struck that *πάθημα* appears in the singular, the only such instance in the New Testament and one of few in extant Greek literature (cf. Arrian, *anab.* 4.22.2; 6.11.2-3). Walter Bauer takes this to suggest that the genitive construction is epexegetical (BDAG, s.v. *πάθημα*), and I am inclined to agree: τὸ πάθημα τοῦ θανάτου, "the suffering of death," here means "the death that he suffered."

The section on gladness is very well argued. Peeler's case for reading ἀντὶ τῆς προκειμένης αὐτῷ χαρᾶς in 12:2 as "*for the purpose of* [not *instead of*] the joy laid before him" is impressive, even here where all the major English versions agree with her (Peeler, 22). All the more impressive is her ingenious argument for reading παρὰ τοὺς μετόχους σου (in Heb 1:9, if not in Ps 44:7 LXX) as "*in the presence of* your fellows" rather than "*more than* your fellows," against most major English versions (Peeler, 21). And while it does not follow that God's anointing in 1:9 "makes him a brother of humanity" (Peeler, 24) (it is that he is anointed *in their presence*, not that he is anointed *like they are*), Peeler's translation is admirably sensitive to the author's capacity for exploiting the ambiguity of certain biblical words and phrases to accord with the near context of his own discourse.

I am less persuaded by Peeler's invocation of ἔλαιον ἀγαλλιάσεως, "oil of gladness," in 1:9 as evidence of the feeling of joy on Christ's part. That "gladness [is] the medium of his anointing" (Peeler, 21) is certainly an overstatement. Oil is the medium of the anointment; gladness specifies which oil it is with which Christ is anointed. There is also the word ἀγαλλίασις itself, on which Peeler comments, "This is a term that conveys an exuberant joy" (Peeler, 21). But while "gladness" or "rejoicing" is an apt gloss, ἀγαλλίασις comes from the lexicon of the cultus (both pagan and Israelite), not that of human affective experience. An ἄγαλμα, literally "object of rejoicing" or "celebrated thing," is simply a temple artifact, a vessel or an altar or a statue.⁵ It is analogous to the English word "festal," which, although etymologically related to partying, typically just means "pertaining to a holy day." In short, I mean to say that Peeler's account of the joy of Christ in Hebrews would be stronger without this putative piece of evidence than it is with it.

I have questions, too, about her understanding of the citation of Ps 21:23 LXX in Heb 2:12, "I will proclaim your name to my brothers, in the midst of the assembly I will praise you." Peeler comments, "Admittedly, the emotive aspect is not explicit here, but is implicit in the act of praising" (Peeler, 24). She then reasons from the fact that our author "quotes from

5 See LSJ, s.v. ἄγαλμα.

the first lines of the exuberant section of praise, rather than the excruciating lament" (Peeler, 24) to conclude that the function of the citation is "to put into sharp relief the joy of Christ" (Peeler, 24). But even if we grant that the affection of joy is implicit in the Greek verb ὑμνέω (which is not at all obvious, in my view), why should our author's selection of this particular verse serve to contrast with its psalmic context rather than allude to its psalmic context? In other words, why not read the citation to mean, "All my misery notwithstanding, yet I will praise you," rather than, "With joy as opposed to misery, I will praise you"? In keeping with a pattern attested across the psalms of lament, it is not that the psalmist was miserable but now is joyful; rather it is that he is still miserable but confident nonetheless. In short, I am not convinced that the affection of gladness is as implicit in this act of praising as Peeler understands it to be.

My second set of comments has to do with Peeler's application of canons of ancient rhetoric to the epistle. Here I have reservations about her move from the emotions of Christ to the rhetorical category of ἦθος. A great deal hinges on her premise that, per ancient rhetorical convention, "Christ's emotions [are] a key element in the overall portrayal of Christ's *ethos*" (Peeler 12), that Hebrews "highlights the emotions of Christ in order to construct an enticing *ethos* [of Christ]" (Peeler, 25). But Aristotle, at least, classifies emotion under the heading not of ἦθος but rather of πάθος, as the word itself suggests. For him, ἦθος and πάθος are two of the three different classes of πίστεις, "proofs." What is more, Aristotle's πίστεις pertain to different parties in the rhetorical encounter: ἦθος to the speaker, πάθος to the auditors, and λόγος to the speech itself. In the matter before us, when Aristotle speaks of πάθη, "emotions," he has in view the emotions of the auditors, not the speaker (much less the speaker's client, on which more in a moment). "The orator persuades by means of his hearers when they are roused to emotion by his speech" (*Rhet.* 1.2.5).⁶ And again, "The emotions are all those affections which cause men to change their opinion in regard to their judgments" (*Rhet.* 2.1.8).

The closest thing I know to Peeler's premise is Cicero, *De or.* 2.189: "It is impossible for the listener to feel [any emotion]... unless all those

6 Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric*, trans. John Henry Freese (LCL; Cambridge, Mass. Harvard, 1926, 1994); translations of Aristotle follow Freese unless otherwise noted.

emotions which the advocate would inspire in the arbitrator are visibly stamped or rather branded on the advocate himself.”⁷ But even this gets us only as far as the speaker, not all the way back to the client, where the emotion presumably lies in the case of Hebrews. And even for Cicero, emotion pertains primarily to the auditors, inasmuch as he speaks of “the emotions which eloquence has to excite in the minds of the tribunal, or whatever other audience we may be addressing” (*De or.* 2.206).⁸

Peeler might find more support in Quintilian, who understands ἦθος and πάθος as being very closely related (“I am prepared to add that *pathos* and *ethos* are sometimes of the same nature, and differ only in degree” [*Inst.* 6.12]) and grudgingly subsumes both under the Latin word *adfectus*, “emotion,” being dissatisfied with the popular equivalency *mores* for ἦθος.⁹ This taxonomy, less so Cicero’s, and Aristotle’s not at all, will work for Peeler’s thesis. And in fact, since Quintilian is much closer in time to Hebrews than Aristotle is, it might be worthwhile to explore a possible shift in the meaning of the terms from the late classical to the Roman period. This might actually give Peeler greater leverage for her use of emotions as evidence of specifically ethical, rather than pathetic, presentation.

Then there is the matter of the ἦθος of the client. Is it right to talk about ἦθος, as Peeler does, as a feature not of the speaker but of the person being represented? Aristotle, for his part, speaks only about the ἦθος τοῦ λέγοντος, “the moral character of the speaker,” whose function is ἀξιόπιστον ποιῆσαι τὸν λέγοντα, “to render the speaker trustworthy” (*Rhet.* 1.2.3-4).¹⁰ Quintilian, again, is perhaps closer to Peeler’s usage, since he allows that ἦθος applies, in a secondary sense, to the client. “Since the orator needs to demonstrate these qualities, if he can, in his client too,

7 Cicero, *De Oratore*, trans. E. W. Sutton and H. Rackham (LCL; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1942, 1988); translations of Cicero follow Sutton and Rackham unless otherwise noted.

8 Cf. *De or.* 2.178: “Nothing in oratory, Catulus, is more important than to win for the orator the favor of his hearer, and to have the latter so affected as to be swayed by something resembling a mental impulse or emotion [*animi et perturbatione*], rather than by judgment or deliberation.”

9 Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, trans. Donald A. Russell (LCL; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001); translations of Quintilian follow Russell unless otherwise noted.

10 My translation.

he must at any rate possess, or be thought to possess, them himself" (*Inst.* 6.2.18).¹¹ But even Quintilian speaks of ῥήθς primarily as a quality *quod a dicentibus desideramus*, "which we desire from speakers" (*Inst.* 6.2.13). If I am right about this (and Peeler, who knows her handbooks better than I do, may know a way around this problem), then the well known "diminished authorial presence" of the author of Hebrews represents a real problem. If ῥήθς pertains to the speaker, and our speaker is hidden from view, then we might wonder whether ῥήθς is the right category at all.

But maybe this need not be a problem after all, because maybe we ought not to think of Christ in the role of client. For the most part, Peeler's essay assumes rather than argues for this identification. By way of contributing to the conversation, I would like to hazard an alternative rhetorical-critical proposal, namely, that Jesus relates to the author of Hebrews not as client to advocate but rather as hero to panegyrist. Hebrews does not defend Christ; it hymns him. When our author writes, "Let us run with endurance the contest laid before us, looking upon Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy laid before him endured the cross, having despised the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God" (Heb 12:2), he speaks in the mode of Pericles at the memorial for the Athenians slain in the first year of the Peloponnesian War: "Fix your gaze upon the power of Athens and become lovers of her, and when the vision of her greatness has inspired you, reflect that all this has been acquired by men of courage who knew their duty and in the hour of conflict were moved by a high sense of honor" (Thucydides, 2.43.1).¹² As Pericles rallies the Athenians to the cause of the war by celebrating the noble dead, so the author of Hebrews urges his audience to steadfastness by hymning the excellencies of Christ. If we conceive the rhetorical encounter in Hebrews along these lines, then a number of the category difficulties I have raised are obviated.

11 For Cicero, too, something like ῥήθς pertains both to the speaker and to his client. "A potent factor in success, then, is for the characters [*mores*], principles, conduct and course of life, both of those who are to plead cases and of their clients, to be approved... and for the feelings of the tribunal to be won over, as far as possible, to goodwill towards the advocate and the advocate's client, as well [*cum erga oratorem tum erga illum pro quo dicit orator*]" (*De or.* 2.182).

12 Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. C. Foster Smith (LCL; New York: Putnam's, 1919).

Third and finally, I would like to raise one methodological question. At several points in her paper, Peeler reasons that the author's choice of emotion-language with respect to Christ is significant because such language is not necessary to the argument being made. She writes, for example, "the use of this term... allows the author to express his thought *more fully than is strictly necessary*" (Peeler, 13; emphasis mine).¹³ I think I understand this line of reasoning, and I can see its intuitive force. It is analogous to some traditional theological arguments for the freedom of God: because someone did not have to do something, his doing so is therefore all the more remarkable. But I worry that in the present case the argument is not sound, which is actually not a problem, since I do not think that Peeler needs it for her overall project to work. There are two things to be said on this subject.

First, how do we know just what is and is not logically necessary to an author's point? Ancient authors (and modern ones, too, for that matter) frequently write more than they really need to have done. On the other hand, too, they often write a good deal *less* than logic would seem to demand, as Pauline interpreters, for example, have learned from hard experience. I take this to mean that, methodologically, it is impossible for us to make judgments as to what an author needed to say in such a way as to weigh it against what he did in fact say. For better or worse, all we have are actual texts, not their hypothetical counterparts in which the same ideas are expressed in logically minimal simplicity.¹⁴ The second thing, though, is that, on the interpretive model that Peeler herself commends to us, this putative distinction between a logically necessary kernel and a rhetorically contingent husk falls down. Peeler shows us a Hebrews that is thoroughly steeped in the linguistic conventions of ancient Greek and Roman persuasive discourse. Our author writes the way he does because that is the kind of author that he is, and that is enough. Peeler's Hebrews convinces its auditors of the moral beauty of Christ not because the author did not need to say it that way but did so anyway, but rather because he did need to say it in just that way.

13 Elsewhere: "One could imagine another author making the same point without using [this word]" (3); "It could have been said more succinctly" (3); "The basic point could have been conveyed without the use of the emotive term" (4).

14 With the possible exception of some reconstructions of Q.